

Introduction

KARL KAUTSKY'S MAJOR OCCUPATION in life was translating Marx's abstract theories and unsystematically presented political precepts into the coherent doctrine of a mass party. From January 1880 to mid-1919, he devoted himself almost exclusively to the socialist, working-class movement in Germany. In his capacity as unofficial theoretician of the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD), Kautsky was the first person to attempt to coordinate systematically the activities of a significant mass movement with the theory of Karl Marx. He did more to popularize Marxism in western Europe than any other intellectual, with the possible exception of Friedrich Engels. Moreover, Kautsky's works were translated into as many as thirty languages in his own lifetime, a scope of potential influence not achieved by Marx, Engels, and perhaps even Lenin until after their deaths. Kautsky's initial popularization of Marx's economic doctrines was probably the first full-length Marxian work translated into Chinese. He corresponded with the leading figures of virtually every socialist party in the world, from those of continental Europe to North and South America, Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East. In book after book, at one international congress after another, from 1895 to 1914, Karl Kautsky was the most important theorist of Marxism in the world. Even today, after he has fallen into relative historical obscurity, Kautsky's works are reissued in countries generally antagonistic to the doctrine he espoused, like the United States and Taiwan, and in the Soviet Union and its satellite nations of eastern Europe.¹

Kautsky was a prolific writer; his works include histories, economic treatises, political discussions, theoretical discourses, and party programs. But except for the last item, probably his most significant contribution to the German and world Marxist movements was his

writing for and editing of the *Neue Zeit*, the major Marxian journal in Germany for almost four decades. Kautsky edited it from its founding in 1883 until 1917. His journal included articles by all the major Marxian theoreticians and politicians of the years before World War I. Its pages carried doctrinal debates, historical analysis, and contemporary political arguments. Although the journal never had a large circulation, it was very influential among socialist intellectuals in Germany and the rest of Europe.

For most of his years as the *Neue Zeit* editor, Kautsky and the political leaders of the SPD agreed on major issues. This was in large part due to Kautsky's dependence on August Bebel for guidance on political questions. Occasional disputes, as on the mass-strike issue in 1903–1906, were exceptions to the rule that the *Neue Zeit* was the theoretical arm of the party. But Kautsky did not by any means dominate SPD policy, and his Marxism was never accepted by the party without reservation. In theoretical terms the SPD began as, and remains to this day, a relatively harmonious but eclectic movement. But in 1914 the sometimes tenuous unity of the party was shattered by the outbreak of war, and Kautsky quickly moved away from the official SPD support for the German war effort. In 1917, he lost the *Neue Zeit* because his antiwar stand offended the party leadership. Kautsky never reestablished any regular connection with the SPD.

Unfortunately, Kautsky's character and theories are misunderstood and misrepresented by friend and foe alike. He has been neither well nor fairly treated by most historians and political scientists, let alone by doctrinaire political writers. Led by Lenin, communists have since 1918 vilified Kautsky as a turncoat and betrayer of the masses. The often equally dogmatic opponents of communism, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world, have criticized him for his radical rhetoric and rigid stands that prevented the SPD from developing into a broadly based democratic party. Although he has not been entirely without defenders, even some of these people have exaggerated and distorted to paint a sharper picture than the sometimes fuzzy reality justifies.²

Many authors have tried to deal with Kautsky's theory in more or less abstract terms, that is, by generalizing about the whole of his enormous corpus of work or by cataloging his theory according to certain sweeping concepts.³ Still others have delved into particular aspects of Kautsky's activities or his relationships with particular people.⁴ While many of these studies make important contributions, they all lack the sort of detailed look at Kautsky's personal life that reveals a different picture of him than does the more abstract or limited approach.

Until now only one major study of Kautsky's entire life has

appeared — Marek Waldenberg's *Wzlot i upadek Karola Kautsky' ego* (The rise and fall of Karl Kautsky). Because it was written in Polish and has not yet been translated, this work can reach only a very limited audience. Furthermore, Waldenberg devoted the overwhelming majority of his thirteen-hundred-odd pages to SPD and German politics, very few to the origins of Kautsky's thought, and even fewer to various personal events that are important to understanding Kautsky's interpretation of Marxism. Waldenberg does, however, make a surprisingly balanced and reasonable assessment of Kautsky.⁵

The present study is not a definitive biography; a great many personal matters are not discussed in detail. My particular concern is with the factors that brought Kautsky to develop his Marxism as he did; therefore I am more concerned with Kautsky-as-Marxist than with Kautsky in any other guise. I have emphasized those aspects of his life which were pertinent to his theoretical development and positions, and I have slighted those which had no direct or significant impact. I undertook this study as a preliminary to a more comprehensive investigation of pre-Leninist Marxism and the national movements associated with it. Many of the other figures from these years, including Luxemburg, Jaurès, Guesde, Plekhanov, and Lenin, for instance, have already been dealt with in biographies. I hope the present work fills a gap in the secondary literature.

The value of a more detailed and personal look at Kautsky's life will be demonstrated in the text that follows, but on four particularly important issues raised by other studies of Kautsky this approach yields new insights. First, Kautsky has a very widespread reputation as a dogmatist, an inflexible ideologue who rejected compromise and dealt harshly with intellectual and political opponents. However, a closer look at day-to-day activities shows that sometimes Engels and even more often Bebel stood behind Kautsky, pressing him on to more severe attacks. This happened in the case of Kautsky's criticism of Rodbertus in 1885, during the revisionism controversy of 1898–1903, and again in 1910 when the SPD Baden branch voted to support the state budget. Kautsky did frequently take firm stands, but often he had to be pushed to these positions by others.

Second, Kautsky's theory has been called Darwino-Marxism, and virtually all writers on the topic have agreed that he was heavily influenced by the evolutionary theory of Darwin and other naturalists. But as early as an obscure 1885 article, Kautsky specifically denied that natural laws could be applied to human society. He reaffirmed this position many times between 1885 and his last major theoretical work in 1928. In the latter he once again very pointedly rejected the

evolutionary mode of development in human society. Only a detailed look at virtually all of Kautsky's writings uncovered this picture.

Third, many critics of Kautsky have claimed to see a break in his political thought sometime around 1910. While before that time he may have been revolutionary, so the argument goes, after about 1910 he became an out-and-out reformist. This position relies heavily on the Kautsky-Luxemburg debate and Kautsky's later rejection of Lenin's movement for evidence. A closer look at the whole of Kautsky's activity after 1910 reveals that he devoted more time to criticizing the reformist wing of the party than the more radical wing. During the Baden budget vote crisis, in defending the expulsion from the SPD of an extreme reformist, in rejecting the resurgent demands to include bourgeois liberals in the party, Kautsky continued his assault on the reformists. Even his support for election coalitions in the 1912 Reichstag campaign, far from representing an about-face for him, was simply the broadening of a position he had taken in 1893 with respect to Prussian Landtag elections.

Finally, Kautsky's most extreme and vociferous critics have been the communists, who have excoriated him as a renegade from the cause of revolution and for criticizing the Russian Revolution in particular. Of course he was a very severe critic of the Bolsheviks; he chastized them for excessive reliance on will and violence, for interfering in the socialist movements of other countries, and for attacks, both physical and verbal, on fellow socialists both inside and outside Russia. Most critics have found the source of Kautsky's critique of the Russian experience after 1917 in his overly strict interpretation of the Marxian paradigm of historical development. But a careful look at his wartime writings and correspondence reveals that he came to emphasize toleration of dissent and freedom of speech and expression within the party in reaction to the efforts of the majority prowar socialists to repress the minority antiwar socialists in Germany. When the Bolsheviks began riding roughshod over fellow socialists in Russia, Kautsky already had personal experience with this sort of repression. He had already seen it destroy the unity and strength of the German working-class movement. In addition to his theoretical objections to forcing backward Russia to socialism, Kautsky had the German model before his eyes.

Tracing Kautsky's intellectual growth reveals much about the appeal of Marxism, since many of the same variegated sources that influenced Marx's intellectual development also influenced Kautsky. Born thirty-six years after the founder of scientific socialism, Kautsky was as a young man also strongly influenced by romanticism, particularly by

George Sand, and even more caught up in the scientific rage of his time than was Marx. All of his adult life Kautsky retained an enthusiasm for Darwin's work, both its scientific content and its intellectually liberating impact. The question of the extent to which he was influenced by Darwin is the central one in analyzing his theory. In fact the larger question of to what extent he thought in scientific or deterministic terms is critical to evaluating the nature and quality of his interpretation of Marx; it is dealt with in greater detail later.

However much he was influenced by the intellectual movements of his time, Kautsky was neither naive nor simplistic in his acceptance of science. His comments on scientific matters are surprising in their sophistication and truly modern qualities. Even his earliest work contrasts sharply with the overdrawn pompousness of many of the scientists who influenced him. Moreover, Kautsky was always aware that the language and epistemology of science were fraught with debatable presuppositions, and he was particularly sensitive to the difficulties presented when these presuppositions were applied to humans and their societies. Thus in 1909, he commented on one of the fundamental techniques in science, the generalization from individuals to collectives: "In reality there are only individuals; their division into groups, classes [and] species exists merely in our heads, is merely a means for us to find our way about in the confusing totality of isolated phenomena."⁶ Even when speaking most confidently about the supposed characteristics of this or that class, of the rulers, the oppressed, or any of the other collectives Marxists use so freely, Kautsky knew that the reality was the individual, not the faceless group. Yet at the same time, he fully accepted the necessity and validity of classification as a statistical construct.⁷

Evaluating the deterministic qualities of Kautsky's thought poses difficult problems, again because like all Marxists he used boldly deterministic language. Certainly Kautsky has been criticized more often for his supposed rigid determinism, even fatalism, than for any other error. The communists see this trait as a denial of Marx's unity of theory and practice, as a denial of the role of will as a shaping force in history. Of course similar criticism lies behind all accusations of Kautsky as dogmatic, whether made by communists or non-communists. One of the major contentions of the present study is that Kautsky balanced between excessive emphasis on will and excessive emphasis on determinism; like Marx, he was ambiguous on this matter. But he was far from oblivious to the difficulties. Once, after having been endlessly accused by his reformist opponents of deterministic dogmatism, Kautsky confronted the issue directly: "If we

speak of the necessity of the victory of the proletariat and of socialism that follows therefrom, we do not mean that victory is inevitable, or perhaps, as many of our critics perceive it, [that victory] must come of itself with fatalistic certainty, even if the revolutionary class does nothing. Here necessity is understood in the sense of the only possibility of further development." The ascension to power by the proletariat was a necessity, it was inevitable, according to Kautsky, only in the sense that without such progress, modern society would "stagnate and rot."⁸

Kautsky's determinism was also conditioned by his realization very early in his career as a socialist that the vital political issues of the day often took precedence over abstract, theoretical discussions. His first effort at a book-length publication was delayed for two years when the second assassination attempt on Kaiser Wilhelm in 1878 led to the outlawing of German social democracy. In a letter to Engels, he recognized that under the circumstances, with the party embattled and struggling to survive, abstract theorizing became "a problem of unlaidd eggs."⁹ Despite his own personal aversion to political involvement, much of Kautsky's theory and career were shaped by political developments. Until after the First World War, most of the eggs would remain unlaidd for Karl Kautsky.

Eventually the constant intrusion of politics became much more than just an obstacle to Kautsky's desire to concentrate on the abstract. His interpretation of Marxism was shaped by the palpable fact that politics, though perhaps at base a reflection of economics, was the area in which the activities of the workers concentrated. In fact, so important did politics become for Kautsky that his perception of the nature of the class struggle, which all Marxists accept as the fundamental fact of capitalist society, was profoundly political, and he transferred the basic cause of revolution from the economic realm to politics. In so doing, he altered the relationship between political and socioeconomic revolution. He saw the goal of the socialist workers' movement as a political revolution, one that could be promoted by acts of will, that had to precede a social revolution. The latter was inevitable but could not be predicted, and it involved a change that could not be pinpointed in time. Although he explicitly made the distinction between social and political revolution only after the events of 1914, 1917, and 1918, it is implicit in most of his writing during the earlier years.

One of the most important sources of this interpretation is not hard to find—the ambiguous nature of Wilhelmine Germany. Though an Austrian by birth (actually a Czech since he was born in Prague, which in 1854 was part of the Austrian Empire), Kautsky made his mark in the history of socialism as the theoretician of the German party. By the

late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in economic terms Germany fit the theoretical model of Marxism. It was heavily industrialized, largely urban, and had a large, socialist, working-class movement. With some exceptions in agriculture, Germany's economic sector was moving toward the increasing concentration predicted by Marx. But the Germany of the kaisers was still a long way from the political model Marxists postulated for a mature capitalist economy. Instead of having a bourgeois-dominated, republican form of government, or even a constitutional monarchy in which real power resided in a bourgeois-dominated government, as did England, Germany had a quasi-representative, quasi-constitutional monarchical state in which the kaiser and his Junker clique held most of the real power. The German financial-industrial-commercial bourgeoisie had influence in the government only to the extent that it was willing to compromise its supposed principles in an alliance with the reactionary, agrarian Prussian aristocracy which controlled the high offices of the government, civil service, and the military. Instead of being a mecca of free trade, as Marxists thought a mature capitalist society would be, Germany had high protective tariffs, initiated by agrarian interests but substantially backed by the bourgeois parties as well. Finally, the traditional bourgeois freedoms of speech, assembly, and press, under which Marxists could freely pursue their goal of a socialist future, were greatly restricted in Wilhelmine Germany.¹⁰ Under these conditions, it is not surprising that Kautsky emphasized the need for the working-class movement in Germany to press for political modernization.

The emphasis he placed on politics, and the nature of the nonliberal political system he opposed, led Kautsky to espouse the cause of traditional liberal freedoms, while at the same time insisting that socialism and liberalism were not on a logical continuum—though he did acknowledge an intimate historical connection. He lived and wrote at a time and in a country in which the concept of political democracy was almost as offensive to proper society as was socialism. In fact many German circles made no distinction between socialism and democracy. Kautsky certainly saw no conflict between the two, but rather felt that true socialism could only be majoritarian and that true democracy could only be achieved under and through a socialist system. However, he seriously doubted that any typically liberal parliamentary system could result in democratic representation—elections were too widely spaced, the electorate too poorly educated, election campaigns too expensive, and so on. At the same time, he shared the general conviction of European socialists that their governmental ideal, at least prior to the achievement of socialism, was the democratic republic. He

seems to have been convinced that under a democratic-republican form of government, a highly conscious, mass workers' party could achieve socialism peacefully, or with very little overt violence. But he was not so sanguine about the possibility of the peaceful victory of the necessary political forms in central and eastern Europe, and thus he postulated the necessity of revolution in those areas. Here again politics played a preeminent role in his theoretical considerations.

Marxism before the First World War, in what might be called the classical years of the doctrine, had not yet taken the dogmatic form that would later be associated with it. In a number of countries, bright, dedicated men and women were still trying to work out the practical implications of the rich, sometimes brilliant, sometimes obscure writings of Marx and Engels. Before Lenin and Russian communism came to power, the authoritarian, antiliberal implications of Marxism had not yet overwhelmed its equally powerful, but perhaps more subtle liberating and humanitarian implications. Many of the inherent contradictions of an apparently deterministic doctrine that called on its followers to organize and act so as to influence the course of history had not emerged before 1914. Furthermore, the people trying to interpret Marxism were working in markedly different environments, in different historical traditions, with different tools. Each individual Marxist intellectual had slightly different values, different interests, and different skills. Each obviously came up with different notions of Marxism.

Many of the intellectuals concerned with relating Marxian theory to the practical realm of the workers' lives were politically active within the movement or within the larger sphere of national politics; Kautsky was not. He was not a politician, a party or trade-union functionary, an organizer or agitator, and he only infrequently spoke at party congresses. Kautsky was a socialist writer and editor, but he had no other position of responsibility. He was an incredibly productive writer—a complete bibliography of his articles, books, translations, and pamphlets would include thousands of items. Thus despite the emphasis he placed on politics in his theoretical work, he did not involve himself in day-to-day struggles. This lack of practical activity sometimes made it difficult for him accurately to predict political developments and the mood of the masses in whose name he wrote.

Karl Kautsky was one of the most important and critically placed of those trying to make Marxism a workable social and political doctrine. His particular interpretation was obviously shaped by his personality, his intellectual training and experience, and the material he had to work with. Like most Marxists, Kautsky was attracted to the doctrine in

the first place because of its essentially moral identification with the plight of the oppressed, and he stuck with Marxism because it offered an explanation of the nature of modern society that satisfied his highly rationalistic and scientific inclinations, bred in the intellectual climate of the late nineteenth century. But he failed in his effort to tie his brand of Marxism to a working-class movement that captured political power. This failure was in part due to his personal objection to some of the apparently necessary actions forced on Marxian revolutionaries if they are to achieve their espoused goals. When confronted with forces beyond his control, as in 1914, or when faced with the agonizing dilemma of choosing between consistency in ends or means, Kautsky generally chose fidelity to the humanistic means, perhaps at the expense of ever realizing the ends that had attracted him for so long.

A special point about Kautsky must be made here, since a surprising number of otherwise well-informed people think that he was a Jew. He was not. Just where this notion came from is unclear. In his memoirs, Kautsky referred to Nazi attacks on him as a Jew and postulated that his grandfather's owning of a house in the Jewish ghetto of Prague may have been the source of this myth. The very widespread association of Jews with socialism is another possible source of this misconception. Kautsky's second wife, Luise Ronsperger, was a Jew. After the Anschluss, two of Karl and Luise's sons were imprisoned by the Nazis, one for the duration of the war, and Luise herself eventually died in Auschwitz after a short internment. The confusion created by these persecutions possibly has led to the notion that Kautsky was a Jew also.¹¹